

# Ploughing new ground

It was a rainy July morning in Bodmin and a long way from his home in the Azores. Portuguese worker Jose Faria, now a ward assistant in a local hospital, braved the weather to bring along his statue of Our Lady of Fatima to the local library. He wanted it to join a special exhibition throwing a spotlight on the dreams, hopes and cultural backgrounds of the workers who come to Cornwall from overseas.

The exhibition, 'I Packed This Myself', is a collection of suitcases containing objects brought by migrant workers to Cornwall which, like the rest of the country, depends heavily on overseas labour. It has been created by the cultural arts organisation Bridging Arts in collaboration with the Diocese of Truro with the aim of forging links between the workers and local communities which might otherwise have little contact. The housing situation in Cornwall, where property prices are sky high, means that many are housed in caravans, often on isolated sites. Language, too, is often a barrier.

Jose Faria first saw the exhibition when it went on display at St Austell Library in early May. "I went home and cried," he said. "After all the years I have been in this country for the first time someone was trying to do something for the Portuguese."

For the display in Bodmin, he not only loaned his statue, but also a scarf, flag, banner and football shirt. Jose is a keen and articulate ambassador for the almost 3,000 Portuguese people who live in central Cornwall, many working in the meat processing industry.

These possessions went on display alongside the salted cod, crocheted tablecloth, Fado CD, rosary and dictionary brought by other Portuguese workers. There was also an Eastern European suitcase, containing bread, Polish



Maureen Twose (left) Cornwall Libraries' Outreach officer with Portuguese children visiting the exhibition at St Austell Library. One of the suitcases is lined with mirrors and asks audiences the question: What would you take if you had to leave home to find work? Picture: Mary Neale/Cornwall County Council

sausages and family photos brought by workers from Poland and Lithuania.

"The aim is two-fold," says Bridging Arts director Susan Roberts. "We want to reach out to the migrant workers and make them feel welcome. But at the same time we're keen to increase understanding of their situation and their backgrounds. We've found that local people have been fascinated to see a selection of items that they've brought with them."

The suitcase exhibition has been making its way around Cornwall, visiting agricultural shows, libraries, local schools and churches since the first suitcase was created in March 2007. It developed out of 'Let's Talk', a pioneering project started by Bridging Arts with the West Cornwall Faith Forum in autumn 2006.

'Let's Talk' is a pack of resources for churches and community groups keen to take action to reach out to migrant workers, whether by staging social evenings, making youth group

facilities available or simply by opening their doors at convenient times for workers on strict shift patterns. There are posters, language postcards with key phrases, a guide for faith leaders on how to stage the evenings and guides to local towns in relevant languages.

"We realised that churches in the heart of local communities, could play a crucial role," says Susan Roberts. "Faith groups can take action swiftly and show real humanity towards people who might be feeling lost, isolated or depressed, or who simply want to make contact with local people and are finding it difficult."

The scheme started in the Kerrier and Penwith districts of west Cornwall, where there are large numbers of seasonal migrant workers on farms.

There are now plans to roll it out to a much wider area. For more details, please email [info@bridging-arts.com](mailto:info@bridging-arts.com) or call Susan Roberts on 020 8749 9010 or 07941 252 444.

Lets Talk is available on [www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk](http://www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk) ■